

UPDATED for the 50th Anniversary July 2019
2009 Michael Collins Interviews Michael Collins

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Statement from Apollo 11 Astronaut Michael Collins

The following is a series of questions and answers prepared by Michael Collins, command module pilot for Apollo 11.

These are questions I am most frequently asked plus a few others I have added. For more information, please consult my book, the 50th anniversary edition of CARRYING THE FIRE, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. [Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys](#) All of the following sections in quotation marks are from that reference.

Q. Circling the lonely moon by yourself, the loneliest person in the universe, weren't you lonely?

A. No.

Far from feeling lonely or abandoned, I felt very much a part of what was taking place on the lunar surface. I know that I would be a liar or a fool if I said that I had the best of the three Apollo 11 seats, but I can say with truth and equanimity that I am perfectly satisfied with the one I have. This venture was structured for three, and I consider my third to be as necessary as either of the other two. I don't mean to deny a feeling of solitude. It was there, reinforced by the fact that radio contact with the Earth abruptly cut off at the instant I disappeared behind the moon. I was alone then, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life. I was it. If a count were taken, the score would be three billion plus two over on one side of the moon, and one plus God knows what on the other.

Q. What do you tell young people who want to become an astronaut?

A. I tell them to get the best possible education they can, and that may lead them into astronautics or another career of equal interest. I point out that the odds are against them (NASA's last class of 12 was selected from over 18,000 applicants). In the meantime, a liberal arts education, particularly English, is a good entry point no matter what the later specialization. I usually talk up English.

Q. Turning to your flight, what is your strongest memory of Apollo 11?

A. Looking back at Earth from a great distance.

"I really believe that if the political leaders of the world could see their planet from a distance of 100,000 miles their outlook could be fundamentally changed. That all-important border would be invisible, that noisy argument silenced. The tiny globe would continue to turn, serenely ignoring its subdivisions, presenting a unified façade that would cry out for unified understanding, for homogeneous treatment. The earth must become as it appears: blue and white, not capitalist or Communist; blue and white, not rich or poor; blue and white, not envious or envied."

Small, shiny, serene, blue and white, FRAGILE.

Q. That was 50 years ago. Would it look the same today?

A. Yes, from the moon, but appearances can be deceiving. It's certainly not serene, but definitely fragile, and growing more so. When we flew to the moon, our population was 3 billion; today it is about 8 and is headed for 10 billion, the experts say. I do not think this growth is sustainable or healthy. The loss of habitat, the trashing of oceans, the accumulation of waste products, these problems are all influenced by rising populations, and this is no way to treat a planet.

Q. You are starting to sound a little grumpy. Are you grumpy?

A. At age 88, yes, in many ways. Some things about current society irritate me, such as the adulation of celebrities and the inflation of heroism.

Q. But aren't you both?

A. Not me. Neither.

Heroes abound, and should be revered as such, but don't count astronauts among them. We worked very hard; we did our jobs to near perfection, but that was what we had hired on to do. In no way did we meet the criterion of the Congressional Medal of Honor: 'above and beyond the call of duty.'

Celebrities? What nonsense, what an empty concept for a person to be, as my friend the great historian Daniel Boorstin put it, "known for his well-known-ness." How many live-ins, how many trips to rehab, maybe--wow--you could even get arrested and then you would really be noticed. Don't get me started.

Q. So, if I wanted to sum you up, I should say "grumpy?"

A. No, no, lucky! Usually, you find yourself either too young or too old to do what you really want, but consider: Neil Armstrong was born in 1930, Buzz Aldrin 1930, and Mike Collins 1930. We came along at exactly the right time. We survived hazardous careers and we were successful in them. But in my own case at least, it was 10 percent shrewd planning and 90 percent blind luck. Put LUCKY on my tombstone.

Q. Okay but getting back to the space program. What's next?

A. I hope Mars. It was my favorite planet as a kid and still is. As celestial bodies go, the moon is not a particularly interesting place, but Mars is. It is the closest thing to a sister planet that we have found so far. I worry that at NASA's creeping pace, with the emphasis on returning to the moon, Mars may be receding into the distance. I would advocate for a "JFK Express to Mars". President Kennedy's 1961 mandate to land man on the moon within the decade was a masterpiece of simplicity and we invoked it often to get the job done.

Q. What is Apollo's legacy?

A. Teamwork and unity. At its peak, the Apollo program employed 400,000 people on the quest for the moon as President Kennedy had asked us to do by the end of the decade. Indeed, after the flight of Apollo 11, Neil, Buzz and I were privileged to go on a world tour. I expected people to congratulate us, "you Americans did it!" BUT, no, everywhere we went we were greeted by "We did it." We, all of us, landed a human on the moon. And I thought that was pretty neat. No other event has been such a unifying force as the Apollo program and I hope we have a few more like that up our sleeve as the space program progresses.

Q. I understand you have become a recluse.

A. I'm not sure that's the word. I think of the Brown Recluse, the deadliest of spiders, and I have a suntan, so perhaps. Anyway, it's true I've never enjoyed the spotlight, don't know why, maybe it ties in with the celebrity thing.

Q. So, how do you spend your time?

A. Running, biking, swimming, fishing, painting, cooking, reading, worrying about the stock market, searching for a really good bottle of cabernet under ten dollars. Moderately busy.

Q. No TV?

A. A few nature programs, and the Washington Redskins, that's about it.

Q. Do you feel you've gotten enough recognition for your accomplishments?

A. Lordy, yes, Oodles and oodles.

Q. Oodles?? But don't you have any keen insights?

A. Oh yeah, a whole bunch, but I'm saving them for the 75th.

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Media Contact: Angelica DeLuccia, angelica@griffincg.com